



World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

PROGRAMME: No. 658, recorded 7 February 1997

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Executive Coordinator for United Nations Reform

JOURNALISTS: Bhaskar Menon, *International Documents Review*
Evelyn Leopold, Reuters

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UNITED NATIONS REFORM

Over the last few years, the United Nations has been under intense pressure to reform itself and become more efficient and cost effective. To organize the reform effort among the different United Nations agencies and departments, the UN Secretary-General has appointed Maurice Strong as Executive Coordinator for United Nations Reform. Mr. Strong describes his role as a coordinator and discusses issues related to the reform process. Mr. Strong believes that if the United Nations is not reformed by its friends, it will be destroyed by its enemies.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration:	28:00"
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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Over the last few years, the United Nations has been under constant pressure to put its house in order. Attempts to reform the world organization have produced positive results, but much more is still needed to streamline and rejuvenate its different organs, agencies and departments.

To further advance United Nations reform efforts, the UN Secretary-General has appointed Maurice Strong as Executive Coordinator for United Nations Reform. Mr. Strong has had extensive international experience both within the United Nations and in the private sector. He is our guest today. Joining me to talk with Mr. Strong are Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review* and Evelyn Leopold of Reuters.

Mr. Strong, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

STRONG: It's good to be back.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Strong, you set out to save the planet as the first Secretary-General of the UN Environment Programme, and now you have the formidable task of trying to save the United Nations through reform. We've heard a lot over the last two or three years about the need for UN reform, although some people are sceptical, a) about the need, and b) about whether it's possible to actually reform the Organization. What is this reform all about? What are you supposed to be doing to bring it about? And how successful do you think it's going to be?

STRONG: Well, first let me say that I am not leading the reform process. The reform process is being led by the Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, who, as you know, brings to this post more experience and more knowledge of the Organization than any of his predecessors. He is leading this process and my job is to help him do it.

Of course, none of us works alone. We build on an immense amount of work that's already gone on in the Organization and on reports and studies — mountains of them in fact — that have been made over the years about reform. So there's no shortage of ideas. The important thing is the will to implement those ideas. This Secretary-General has the will. He's committed himself. And that's why I'm very pleased to be helping him do it. And also we do have a network of reform agents throughout the UN system. I mean, right in the house, of course, the reform effort has been strongly led by Mr. Connor.

LITTLEJOHNS: The chief financial officer.

STRONG: That's right. And also by Mr. Speth on the economic and social side. I do not take over any of their work. All I am really doing is helping to pull together the

various threads at the level of the Secretary-General himself so he can take the important decisions that he has to make.

LITTLEJOHNS: So you're the sort of point man for reform.

STRONG: That's perhaps one way of saying it. But it is a large team and I'm simply one of the facilitating members of that team.

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, when we speak of reform, Mr. Strong, what are we really talking about? Are we talking about down-sizing the Organization? In our introduction we talked about streamlining. I mean, that's a very general term. What does it mean?

STRONG: Well, I look at reform in two senses. And one is reform in the sense of changing what we have, improving it; improving its performance, yes, and in the course of it improving its cost effectiveness. Down-sizing *per se* is not an objective; the objective is to improve the performance of the Organization so that it can meet the objectives that are set for it by its shareholders, its member Governments, and restore its credibility, restore confidence in it. And that is the key objective in it. Now, beyond that there is a process of what I would call re-forming the United Nations, re-hyphen-forming.

LITTLEJOHNS: Restructuring?

STRONG: Restructuring, reshaping it to meet the very different sets of priorities it will have to confront in the 21st century. So reform and re-form.

LEOPOLD: Mr. Strong, we were in Washington a very short time ago, and you met members of the Congress. And the United States owes, by its estimation, close to \$1 billion; by the UN's estimation, \$1.5 billion, which is part of the problem that the UN is having reforming or just functioning. Did you get the feeling when you were on the Hill that reform meant restructuring, or did it mean slash and burn and cutting the staff in half?

STRONG: Well, obviously amongst those who are concerned strictly with budgets, there's a concern about numbers. And that is only understandable. And also all of us are concerned about numbers and about budgets. The US itself is in a process of having to meet very stringent budgetary targets. Most of the UN members are doing that, so it's not surprising that they should be expecting the same from the UN. The UN's actually made quite a lot of progress in that direction. And we're at a zero base budget situation right now, reduced the staff significantly — there's been some progress made. And so we don't start from zero. But the progress that has been made has perhaps been easier than some of the things that we now will have to do.

MENON: But to relate what you are now saying to what you said earlier about re-forming the UN, how clear a sense do you have that the United States has this perspective? That it sees the need to reconcile the, shall we say, needs of power with the aspirations that are embedded in the Organization?

STRONG: Well, you know, the United States Government has the financial objective that we discussed, to reduce the costs of its own support for the UN, as it is doing with most of its domestic programmes. But it also has a fundamental interest in a stronger UN, a better performing UN, a more effective UN. There's no question about that. So the emphasis is not just on cost cutting. That is, of course, the concern of some.

MENON: Could I broaden my question a bit, away from the US to all Governments? When you're talking about reforming the UN, obviously so many different conceptions of the UN have to mesh if reform is to be effective. In India we talk about — talking about philosophical concepts of the world — that it's like the moon on a rainy night; when it emerges after a rain, it's reflected in all different puddles. It's the same moon, but there are many reflections. In a similar sense, many Governments — there are 185 member Governments — all of them have a different conception of what the UN should be. How are you going to go about reconciling this?

STRONG: Well, I think you're quite right, there are differences in perception, but there are many, many common perceptions as well. I think there is a general consensus amongst the membership of the UN, which is of course the nations of the world, that we need the UN — first of all, that we need a more effective UN, that we need to reshape the UN to meet a rather different mix of challenges and priorities that will confront us, as I've mentioned, in the 21st century. So I think there's a high degree of consensus. There are many differences, too. But that's the job of diplomacy. That's the job that faces us. We've had to confront that job on many occasions.

LEOPOLD: But whose vision will dominate? I mean, there are so-called benchmarks that Senator Helms, head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the US Congress, had mentioned, which seem to be some conditions to set the pace of reform according to a certain vision, which is the cut-it-in-half vision, and not necessarily one that you or Mr. Annan share. How are you going to reconcile those? When is the moment of truth going to come in?

STRONG: Well, Secretary-General Annan I think made it very clear in his very good discussions, incidentally, with Senator Helms and members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that we need benchmarks too. The Secretary-General needs benchmarks. The key thing is to make sure that the benchmarks that the US decides are important to it in terms of its financial contributions are benchmarks that the Secretary-General can accept and feels he can meet. And we left that meeting with the impression that Senator Helms wanted to make every effort to ensure that the kind of benchmarks that he sets — now, he doesn't set benchmarks for the whole UN, he sets benchmarks for the release of funds to the UN; the Secretary-General has to set the benchmarks for the entire

UN, and he has to do so, as he's made clear, mindful of the interests and the positions of the 184 other countries. And he made that position very clear. And I think there was a very good meeting of the minds on this. Now, of course, we haven't yet received a check; we don't know yet what Senator Helms' benchmarks will be.

MENON: A key issue is economic and social development. Now, developing countries, a majority of the UN membership feel that this is a critically important role for the UN, in economic and social development. The United States has made it quite clear that it does not see the UN as having a major role in this area. How do you reconcile this? Now, you've moved from the private world, the private sector world into the public sector quite easily, and so you know the border fairly well. Where do you draw the line?

STRONG: Well, first of all, let me say that the US administration and much of Congress — certainly not all of Congress — does in fact recognize that the UN has an important development role. There may be differences in what that role is. So it is not the position of the US that there should be no development role for the UN. That is a position of some in the US Congress, yes, because they have a general view of government — it's not just a view of the UN, they have a general view of government that government should be smaller, government should be less intrusive in many sectors. And that is reflected in their attitude towards the UN's development role.

MENON: You mean the reduction of the US contribution to, for instance, the major UN Development Programme, UNDP, down to its now seventh or eighth largest contributor. It used to be the top contributor.

STRONG: Yes, yes.

MENON: Does that not reflect a US position?

STRONG: Yes, it does. It reflects the position of a Congress preoccupied with domestic cost-cutting, with cutting their own budget and, in relation to that, cutting their contributions to international organizations. However, while it may have been accompanied by a desire on the part of some members of Congress to get the UN budget out of the development field, it was not the dominant consideration. And in fact the President in his most recent budget address has asked for significant increases. So that is not a withdrawal. Yes, every country is having problems with its international contributions, it's not just the US. It's a tough time for Governments. They're all reducing. And their international commitments are pretty hard to maintain at their present levels when they're having to make major cuts in domestic programmes. So this is not solely a US problem, and it does not signal a widespread movement for the UN to withdraw from the development business. It does challenge the UN to be more innovative in ensuring that it can meet the development needs of its clients, and particularly the least developed countries, particularly countries like

Africa. I was very pleased to hear recently from Mr. Gingrich that he believed that it was very important that the world community take some better initiatives on Africa. Well, you know, he's pretty important, he's Speaker of the House, and to have the Speaker of the Republican House say that we've got to do better for Africa, we've got to do more for Africa, you know, it's not in line with how we interpret some of the signals that have been coming out of Washington. But to me there are some very promising signals that are not yet fully, I think, appreciated.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Strong, you're from Canada, although of course you wear an international hat now. Is Canada essentially in agreement with the United States on this reform procedure and what you expect to achieve?

STRONG: Well, I don't think we look at it as kind of are we in agreement with the United States. Canada has been very strong in urging the United States to pay its dues. We have been very — we've taken issue with the United States on many issues, but, broadly speaking, we have a general commitment to the UN. I think Canada has evidenced that commitment over the years in many ways, both in the development activities of the UN, in the environmental activities of the UN, in the humanitarian and the peace-keeping activities of the UN. And many of those have been very much in harmony with US positions. But, more broadly, we Canadians like to feel that we take our own decisions, and very often we're aligned with the majority of the membership of the UN, even in cases where the US is not.

LITTLEJOHNS: But do Canadians share the view, what seems to be the view at any rate, of many conservative, and not only conservative, Americans that somehow the UN has gotten to be too big for its britches?

STRONG: I don't think that's the impression, that the UN has got too big for its britches. I think the impression in Canada — Canada is very pro-UN, as we've shown time after time, but Canada, too, has taken the view that after a little over 50 years of course there are some things that need changing in the UN. That's true of any organization. And Canada has taken the view — and this is a view I share, not just as a Canadian, but as a UN public servant — that if the UN isn't reformed by its friends, it's going to be destroyed by its enemies. And, therefore, the friends of the UN have got to get in there and roll up their sleeves and make the Organization work. It's working far better now than most people think.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Maurice Strong, Executive Coordinator for United Nations Reform.

MENON: In this effort that you're talking about of making essentially a new Organization for the new century, is it effective or is it constraining you at all to talk about streamlining and rejuvenation when actually what you're talking about is creating a new

Organization? Because the needs of a globalizing world are quite different from the world that existed with the UN was created. And to what extent is this being dealt with?

STRONG: Well, that is in fact the main task. The fact that the world is different — we all know it's different, and it's going to be even more different in the period — doesn't mean you discard everything you've done and start over again. The world is going to be different, but the world is on a trajectory that has its roots in our past experience, and much of that past experience will be relevant. We'll need to draw upon that. And much of the experience and the capacity of the UN that it has built up over the last more than 50 years will be in fact an important basis for its future work. So you don't discard what we've got, you build on it, and you shift, and you've got to recast your.... And even your methods of work, even the methods of work in the UN can be changed now. We've got mass — we've got technologies. We can have conferences now without having to move the bodies around the world! We have an information flow. We can print documents on e-mail, make them instantly available around the world. There are so many things that we can do differently today that will both improve our performance and improve our cost effectiveness.

LITTLEJOHNS: But that also requires a considerable investment, and the UN doesn't really have the funds to invest on a very large scale in the new technology, does it?

STRONG: Well, the UN does have the funds that its members are prepared to let it have. And I think if we can make the case, and I believe we can make the case, then we'll get the funds. I don't think it's easy. It's never easy. But my own experience is that in a world in which — you know, for all our talk about austerity and poverty, we still live in the wealthiest civilization in history, and the United Nations is an essential instrument in facilitating the functioning of that civilization. And therefore an investment in the United Nations to improve its performance is an investment in our common interests and in our common future. Now, we have to make that case in specific ways, and we will do that. And I'm pretty sure that in making that case we will get the resources that we need. But I believe we can do it largely within the existing envelope of resources in the short term.

LEOPOLD: Can you give any examples of what your thinking is on how things should be reformed? I notice you have Mr. Gus Speth in your working group, the head of the UN Development Programme, an American. He's come out with his own plan already, which combines a lot of UN agencies under his agency. Is that part of the thinking of your group? And Mr. Annan's thinking?

LITTLEJOHNS: Is this part of the streamlining we've talked about?

STRONG: Well, Mr. Speth's proposals are very relevant, they're very important, they contain an awful lot that I think would receive widespread support. They also contain some things that are less well supported. That's why you have a process. You get the ideas, you

get the views of a number of actors. And Mr. Speth is one of the most important of these actors. But the Secretary-General, and then of course the Governments themselves, will have to choose from the proposals that come forward. Mr. Speth's proposals are an extremely important factor, but they are not the only factor. Governments themselves have very important views, and in the final analysis, Governments will decide. Now, that is not to downgrade the role of the Secretary-General. There are 185 Governments. It's not easy to get them together. The Secretary-General has prerogatives of his own under the Charter as Chief Administrative Officer, and he is moving on those. He's making changes right now. He's not waiting. In those areas where he believes there's been enough study and enough discussion — and there are quite a few of those areas — he's moving ahead. He's already making some —

LEOPOLD: At the same time, Mr. Strong, though, he just announced a new cabinet and a lot of appointments, and the only people who are really new in his group are those jobs he had to fill — his old job and another senior job of someone who was leaving. And they're filled with very known people who haven't come up in the past with any creative ideas on this. I mean, the new people.

LITTLEJOHNS: Except you, of course.

LEOPOLD: Except you, right, when you've been here before. So I mean is this going to change gradually, the personnel? Or does he believe that you can keep all the same people in the same departments and they will voluntarily cut down their own work?

STRONG: Well, in my last job I ran an organization bigger in fact than the United Nations. I had the same problem. And, you know, I wanted to change, but I left people more or less in their jobs until I was really sure of the changes that we were going to make. Now, under Secretary-General Annan we are making some very important changes in the UN, and it would be quite normal in any management to keep a fair number of your original cadre through that reform process, because it's only in light of the reform process and the decisions that will be made about it that you'll see how some of these posts will be recast.

MENON: Then let me rephrase that question in a slightly broader way. You've seen the UN now, as we said, seven times as Under-Secretary-General, which is probably a record, and you've seen it over two decades. What is your sense of the competence of UN staff?

STRONG: Some of the most competent people I have met in my career, private or public, are in the UN. Having said that, it is one of the most cumbersome systems for employing and deploying our talent. It isn't so much the fact we don't have talent, it's the way in which we have — our somewhat bureaucratic methods have actually constrained the full —

LITTLEJOHNS: Appointments and promotions?

STRONG: Well, that's part of it, that's part of it. And, actually, deployment. I mean, one of my toughest jobs every time I've come in — I've usually come in to do something different, a change or, you know, a new initiative, and the toughest job has always been to get my people. Not that I couldn't find the people, good people, but to get them through the process, and also frankly to get them the right levels and that kind of thing. I don't want to get into a lot of detail, but I'm saying that we — and it's quite normal. The organization I headed was a Government utility, and it was almost 100 years old. Some of the best professional people in the world! But after a number of years an internal culture develops, a bureaucratic system, which actually constrains your use of good people.

MENON: Are you then saying that the talented and the competent are a minority, and that the majority are not?

STRONG: No. No, I'm not saying that at all. I'm saying that I think the mix of talent in this organization is as good or better than that of most of the organizations that I know in either private or public sector. But the system itself.... Look. For example, the Secretary-General is the chief executive officer, called chief administrative officer, but that's what he is, he's the CEO in private sector talk, and yet he has under him, he has secretariats that also have to report to various intergovernmental bodies that give them separate instructions. Now, it's very tough to run an organization under those conditions when you have the responsibility, as he does, and yet that responsibility is constrained by sometimes differing guidance and policy instructions coming from various governing bodies. And then you have tremendous pressure on the appointments process from the political side, and that sometimes affects — I should say perhaps quite often affects the appointments process, particularly at the senior levels. So, you know, there are some constraints. Now, reforming's not going to remove all these constraints. They come from the realities of the fact that this is an organization that serves a very political constituency. But many of them can be very severely improved. For example, in the area of services, a lot of these organizations have their own recruitment processes, they have their own financial accounting, administrative processes, they even have their own printing. I understand in Geneva there are four separate printing offices, all under the ostensible control of the Secretary-General. Now, we have some positive examples. The interpretation and the translation services are, broadly speaking, common services. But many other services are not. Well, I think the quality of the service and the performance can be improved, and at the same time cost reduced. I do not start that cost reduction, slash and burn, is the way to go. Improving performance is the key. And that means changing some of the methods of work, ensuring where there is duplication that that duplication is minimized, if not removed. And there's an awful lot of

potential for that. But you know, beyond that we have to look out into the new century, and we're very close to that new century. We have to see what are the broad tasks that the world community expects of the United Nations.

MENON: But perhaps more important than looking outside is looking inwards, because I've never seen — I've also moved in and out of the system over the years, and I've never seen, or perhaps that's the wrong thing to say, but the UN is enormously compartmentalized. People in one area have no idea what people just down the corridor might be doing.

STRONG: Yes.

MENON: How are you going to improve the communications within the system?

STRONG: Well, I think you're quite right, internal communication needs to be improved, and it can be improved. The fact now that you've got e-mail access, you've got tremendous access to the means of transparency — I believe in transparency, and the more transparency there is, the more that people in one part of the system can know what's going on in the other part of the system, the more likely it is that they're going to get together and concert their efforts —

LEOPOLD: Will that transparency carry over to the world at large? Because there's been a tendency, as there is in many organizations, to keep knowledge and information in a very small group. And as press people here, we've often torn our hair out.

STRONG: Well, if there's one thing that I've learned in the UN it's that there are no secrets in the UN. And in fact, someone asked me once, you know, how do you get something to the attention of the press, and I said, just mark it confidential.

[LAUGHTER]

But, no, truly, I think transparency is a problem. Compartmentalization of the UN is a problem, there's no question about that. But remember the place where the UN delivers is in the field, in the countries in which it serves. And there's been a tremendous improvement there in the whole resident coordinator system. We've still got some divergence in the sense that individual agencies have their own individual representation. There is a fragmentation still in our efforts in the field, and that — see, that's where it really counts. And there's still a fragmentation at the headquarters level despite the fact there's been some progress, and there have been some good recommendations for improving that, for consolidation. Now, this Secretary-General, and why I'm rather excited to be serving him in this area, is determined to change that. He knows how to do it; he also knows that he's got to consult with his shareholders, Governments — they're the main actors. He's going to accelerate that process of consultation with them; he's going to accelerate action in the areas in which he himself has his control.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Strong, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Maurice Strong, Executive Coordinator for United Nations Reform. He was interviewed by Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review* and Evelyn Leopold of Reuters.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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